

In the Footsteps of Sakyamuni

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The word Sakya is a word of Asian reality dating back to much more than two millennia. Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of the line of philosophic thinking which went under the generic name Buddhism in the centuries that followed, was believed to be an heir to the throne, being the only descendant of a line of provincial rulers on the Himalayan slopes who were then known by the name of Sakyas. But Siddhartha renounced life in the household, and pursued a spiritual quest. On gaining his enlightenment or becoming the Buddha, he came to be called Samana Sakyaputta or the Sage who is the Son of the Sakyan community.

Thereafter, all of us who take to a life mendicancy as his disciples in the Theravada tradition pride ourselves in being called by the same name *samaṇā sakyaputtiyā*. He was born in India as a human, a child of human parents, lived as a man with a wife and child and at the age of eighty died as a man subject to physical decay and disease, but as one who had transcended all human foibles and failings, common to both men and women.

Let us here straight-away reject the mistaken claim sometimes seen floating in the distant clouds of Indian scholarship that he lived a Hindu and died a Hindu. This is nothing but a smoky haze, generated by someone for the fulfillment of some need, no more, no less. Look clearly in the World Passport Office, and you will see it clearly entered as "Siddhartha Gautama was born in India and he lived and died an Indian." There was no need for him to apply for any visa, temporary or permanent, to enter any other land. The India of the time did not create the need for him to seek amnesty elsewhere.

Centuries passed thereafter without any real controversies. The only real issue being the exact year of his death. It has been well argued and most of us now gladly accept the latter date 483 B.C. which seems historically more

acceptable. In the more vital field of Buddhist thinking, in the last three decades or so, something more cogent is taking place. Even before the seventies of this century, there started blossoming up somewhere in the Far East of the Buddhist world, namely Japan, the wonderfully brilliant idea that this Shakyamuni of the Middle Kingdom [Madhya Desa] of India about whom we have discussed so far, is in reality the eternal Buddha or the Buddha of all times. He was coming back on the scene to be the central figure of Buddhist thinking, gradually replacing Amida [Amitabha and Amitayau] of Mahayana ascendancy.

If my memory of the 1970 ' s is correct, it was President Niwano, Head of the Rissho Hosei Kai sect of Japan, who first mooted this idea. I stand to correction, please. More than twenty-five years ago, as a younger student and teacher of Buddhism, this new declaration born of deep conviction, and transcending all inherited religious affinities, pleased me immensely. But I knew, and I was confident that the best expressions of this were yet to come in due course. And that before the end of this tattered and disintegrating century. Indeed, it is now taking place, right before us.

A little more than two years ago, we had the good fortune of participating in the 60 th birthday celebrations of his Holiness, the Da Lai Lama in New Delhi. On that occasion, as well as in Melbourne a couple of years later, in our very presence again, his Holiness not only said it himself, but also emphasized to all of us who were gathered together to greet him that we were all disciples of Shakyamuni and therefore were all brothers, set out on a path of self-correction, for our own good and for the good of those around us. That was the way his Holiness presented the message of Buddhism to the thousands who had gathered to hear him in Melbourne.

Now let me turn to what I believe to be the validity and the authenticity of this turn of thinking by the masters of the two great traditions of Mahayana and Vajrayana, which branched off from the mainstream Buddhism of ancient India. Without much debate and dispute, it is agreed that early Buddhism witnessed the

emergence of the so-called Mahayana within the first five hundred years after the passing away of the Buddha. This surfaced a new concept of a universally present ever-loving Buddha, whose assistance through grace and compassion may be sought by a worshipper, both for the fulfillment of worldly needs here and now, as well as for the achievement of the transcendental goal of liberation in Nirvana from the ills of long-range samsaric suffering.

This new trend in religious thinking as far as Buddhism is concerned, within four to five centuries of its existence, within India itself, is no more than a swing back to an old pattern of thinking of the human mind. Even more than two thousand years before the time of the Buddha, Indians during the time of the sacred texts known as the Vedas, were accustomed to look upon natural phenomena with a sense of divine awe, and elevate each one of them in turn to a position of divine capability and command, referred to by Indologists as *Kathenotheism*. Hence the vast pantheon of Gods and Goddesses, presiding over diverse areas of life like prosperity, wisdom and family life.

The sun as Surya and Savitar was the celestial life-giver. The God of Rain or Parjanya was the Lord of Agricultural Fertility and Fecundity. It is he who deposits the seed in plants [*Parjanya dadhāti osadhīsu garbham*]. Even in the moral domain, these elemental powers were vested with the power to correct humans and enforce good behaviour on them. Varuna or God of Waters was ever ready to punish persons contaminated with moral guilt by filling their bellies with water [i.e. inflicting them with the disease known as dropsy] and rolling them prematurely into their graves. He, together with Indra was the guardian of the moral law of Rita [*Indravarūṇau ritasa gopau*]. Parjanya as God of Rain and Thunder would strike the evil-doers with lightning and destroy them [*Parjanyaḥ stanayan hanti duskritaḥ*].

Through these weaker areas in the structure of human thinking, of diffidence and helplessness and lack of self-reliance, new thrusts, like volcanic eruptions, were going to force themselves out. People were falling back on the comfort of prayer and supplication, of looking up to agents of divine assistance, besides

themselves. The Buddha was soon to be universalized through time and space. He is made to be ever present in time and span through past, present and future. Therefore he is infinite [= amita > amida] in his life-span and comes to be viewed as Infinite Life or Amitāyuh. With the Indian awareness of the vastness of the cosmos, the Buddha had also to be present everywhere. So he became the ever-radiating light present everywhere or Infinite Light or Amitābhah. Through the universal availability of his presence everywhere and at all times, his followers gained a new sense of security. A new hope to address themselves for succour and refuge.

This new source of solace and comfort soon became available for mankind, definitely but distantly placed in a paradise beyond the humans. This is *Sukhāvati* or Paradise of the Western World. His greatness came to be expressed in triplicate in the ingenious theory of the Threefold Body or *Trikāya*. They are 1. The Body of Truth Eternal or Dharma [*Dharma-kāya*], 2. Experiential Body [*Sambhoga-kāya*] and 3. Manifest Body [*Nirmāna-kāya*] which expresses itself before the world. The dignity and solemnity of the Buddha is maintained at all times.

But a more realistic, i.e. a more down to earth and more intimate network of relations with the world of mortals had to be set up and maintained. In some of the early Buddhist Sanskrit texts like the Lotus of the True Doctrine or Saddharmapuṇḍarika Sutra which reflects traces of early Mahayanic leanings, we see the emergence of a new concept of servers or beings who religiously dedicate themselves to help others to achieve their liberation by getting into the world of the Buddha or the Western Paradise. That is the furthest point to which the worldlings need to be navigated so that they may be enabled to reach their goal of enlightenment. In the Lotus Sutra, the server who dedicates himself to this task is called a *bodhisattva*. This name [*bodhi + sattva*] immediately suggests that the person who does so is himself keen on the attainment of enlightenment, but that he would do so, theoretically only after getting everybody else to

enlightenment before seeking his own. Both with regard to the service the Bodhisattva renders to others and his own spiritual aspirations, they are within the identical framework.

The Lotus Sutra itself gives us a more than complete picture of what such a server can be. There is a chapter therein which is totally devoted to a study of the magnificent role of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. His very name is made up of the two words *avalokita* [= beholding] and *īsvara* [= lord]. This literally means the Lord who beholds. The word or the verb *avaloketi* is used in the earliest Pali contexts of the suttas in the sense of viewing or looking upon with compassion. In the Ariyapariyesana Sutta [M. I.168] a persuading Maha Brahma prevails upon the Buddha to look upon [*avekkhassu*] the worldlings who are plunged in grief [*sokāvatīṇṇaṃ*], and thereafter deliver his teachings to them. This is clear proof that Buddhism from the earliest times [that is even in the Theravada Buddhism of the earliest Pali texts] has had this attitude of looking upon worldlings with compassion, with a view to getting them on to the good path leading to liberation.

Thus primarily the role of the bodhisattva in the Mahayana as it is emerging appears to be to serve as an unflinching prop which gives additional strength in one's spiritual quest and to serve as a beacon of light indicating a sense of direction, i.e. attainment of *bodhi* or enlightenment. In the Mahayana, they seem, more or less, to tend the flock on behalf of the Buddha whose existence is only a symbolic reality.

But the character of the bodhisattvas and the role they are called upon to play is soon seen to be enlarged and diversified. The sympathetic role of bodhisattva in relation to the suffering worldlings who are in distress, danger and depravity is ever widening. From the role of spiritual guidance and upliftment, they are soon called to focus attention on the dangers to which the humans of the world are exposed. The Lotus Sutra itself tells us of the wide range of human disasters from which the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, on being invoked, would rescue people. They include fires, shipwrecks, assaults by brigands etc. out of

which people safely come out, completely unscathed. The Chinese traveller monk Fa Hsien of the 5th century is said to have been mercifully assisted by this *bodhisattva* during a shipwreck, on his way back to China from Sri Lanka. Nichiren Shonin of Japan is reported to have benefitted in a similar miraculous way while he was about to be beheaded by sword-wielding executioners.

Perhaps in response to this multi-faceted role the *bodhisattva* has to play, he comes to be more adequately equipped for the task. From the visual range of activity of seeing people in diverse lamentable situations for which he is called the Seeing Lord or *Avalokita + īsvara*, he now comes to be also the Lord who Sees and Hears, with the name being broken as *Avalokita + svara*. The Chinese render the first and the earlier as Kuan Yin and the latter as Kuan Shih Yin. The former, i.e. the Seeing Lord, is represented in early Indian and Central Asian paintings as a male divinity with a very impressive martial looking mustache, and as possessing a thousand hands on the palms of each one of which there is an eye. [Note the Buddhist god Sakka being called Thousand-eyed or *Sahasra-netta*]. This apparently was believed to ensure that he misses no part of the visible world.

Equipped adequately both for seeing and hearing of the sufferings of humanity, the *bodhisattva* is always available for rescue operations at all levels of danger and peril. He is also said to give to men and women, on request, gifts of lucky and fortunate wise children. It is perhaps about this time that this *bodhisattva* gradually began to assume a more female-looking graceful lady-like form. It is for this reason that the name Kuan Yin came to be always translated into English as Goddess of Mercy. She also thereafter came to be both painted and sculptured with a baby on her lap.

The dual role of the *bodhisattva*, to benefit worldlings both for mundane and material things of the world as well as for transcendental spiritual achievements, is beautifully synthesized in the Lotus Sutra which ends the chapter on the greatness of the *bodhisattva* by adding that the *bodhisattva* would help worldlings

in the elimination of the primary evils of greed, hatred and delusion [*rāga dosa moha*]. This seems to complete the entire gamut of possible human expectations. And the newly emerging *bodhisattva* does and must deliver the goods. As for the layman, it is only a minimal payment he is called upon to make. Only a heartfelt adoration of the *bodhisattva* [... *bodhisattvāya namo namaḥ*] is to be made, clear and loud.

In the light of what has been indicated so far it is not difficult for a student of religion to get a clear picture of the growth process of fact and fiction in the history of Buddhism. The need for and the justification of the growth of varying types of myths and legends within the corpus of religious literature, in any religion at that, can thus be clearly understood. It is gratifying to us, almost at the turn of the century now, to notice the emergence of this very wholesome and honestly historical approach to the growth of diverse traditions within the body of a world religion like Buddhism, and discover within it a very real homogeneity which is seen to be universally applicable and satisfying. This is the light in which the entire world is beginning to see and admire the teachings of Buddhism. This is why it is being described today as the fastest spreading religion in many different parts of the world.